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*Published in:*  
Journal of Reformed Theology

*DOI:*  
[10.1163/15697312-00902013](https://doi.org/10.1163/15697312-00902013)

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

*Document Version*  
Final author's version (accepted by publisher, after peer review)

*Publication date:*  
2015

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
van den Belt, H. (2015). Spiritual and Bodily Freedom: Christian Liberty in Early Modern Reformed Theology. *Journal of Reformed Theology*, 9(2), 148–165. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15697312-00902013>

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JOURNAL OF REFORMED  
THEOLOGY 9 (2015) 148–165

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# Spiritual and Bodily Freedom

*Christian Liberty in Early Modern Reformed Theology\**

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# Spiritual and Bodily Freedom

## *Christian Liberty in Early Modern Reformed Theology\**

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### **Abstract**

The notion of Christian liberty is essential for the understanding of the Reformed concept of the law. Early modern protestant theology, however, made a sharp distinction between spiritual and bodily liberty. This distinction originated from Luther's concept of the two kingdoms. It enabled John Calvin to criticize the church for binding the consciences and at the same time appeal to the civil government for reform of the church.

Because of the reshuffling of the *Institutes* in 1559 this function of Christian liberty is easily lost out of sight. In the further development of Reformed theology the distinction between spiritual and bodily liberty was applied to the Christian life of individual believers, as the examples of William Perkins and the Leiden *Synopsis of Purer Theology* show. Thus the reforming power of the distinction was lost and it was used to confirm the political and social status quo instead.

### **Keywords**

John Calvin – *Institutes* – William Perkins – *Synopsis of Purer Theology* – Spiritual liberty – Bodily liberty – Hungarian students in the Netherlands

\* A draft of this article was presented at the 10th irti Conference 'Calvinism and Law' in Sárospatak, July 2–7, 2013.

## Introduction

On October 20, 1627 the Hungarian student Stephanus N. Keczkemetinus (István from Kecskemét), one of the many Hungarian students at Leiden University, defended seventeen theses on *De Libertate Christiana* in the first repetition of the series of disputations that had led to the famous Leiden handbook of Reformed systematic theology, the *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae*.<sup>1</sup> These separate disputations were mostly not collected by the university libraries and many of them are lost. Thanks to foreign students who collected the disputations and bound them, we can compare the texts of the repetitions with that of *Synopsis* itself. One of the other Hungarian students in Leiden, Ioannes Matko Lascovius (Laskai Matkó János), collected almost a complete series, partly of the first and partly of the second repetition.<sup>2</sup>

In one of his theses Keczkemetinus says “There are two kinds of servitude: corporeal or civil and spiritual. It is not the place here to deal with the first or with its opposite [corporeal or civil] liberty, but with the second.”<sup>3</sup> This Leiden disputation gives a fine discussion of spiritual liberty but does not deal with the relationship between Christian freedom and the magistrate or politics. This is remarkable given the original connection between the two topics in John Calvin’s first edition of the *Institutes*. The main question for this article is where the tendency in Reformed theology to reserve Christian liberty for the spiritual realm comes from and how it developed. This question will be answered from the subsequent editions of John Calvin’s *Institutes*, from William Perkin’s *Cases of Conscience* and from the Leiden *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae*. The article ends with a short evaluation and some remarks about the theological consequences of this development.

1 Andreas Rivetus, *Disputationum theologicarum repetitarum trigesima-quinta, De libertate christiana*, Stephanus N. Keczkemetinus respondent (Leiden: Elzevir, 1627). Together with all the disputations from the first *repetitio*, the disputation *On Christian Liberty* is owned by the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin. On the *Synopsis* and its repetitions see Donald Sinnema and Henk van den Belt, “The *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae* (1625) as a Disputation Cycle,” *Church History and Religious Culture* 92 (2012), 503–537.

2 The collection is owned by Debrecen Reformed Theological University Library and labeled ‘Egbekötve: rmk1181–1196.’ The cover of the bound collection originally had the supralibros i.m.l. I thank Róbert Oláh from the Debrecen library for helping me discovering the original owner.

3 Rivetus and Keczkemetinus, *De libertate christiana*, thesis 1.

### John Calvin's *Institutes*

In the original edition of Calvin's *Institutes* (1536) the title of the sixth chapter was *De libertate christiana, potestate ecclesiastica, et politica adiminatione*.<sup>4</sup> In this catechetical and apologetic work Calvin thus connected Christian freedom both with the power of the church and with the civil government.

In the second edition of the *Institutes* (1539) Calvin splits this final chapter into the chapters fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen and adds a seventeenth chapter *De vita christiana*, in which he describes Christian life as a pilgrimage, characterized by the meditation on the future life. This chapter serves as the conclusion of the *Institutes* from the second to the fourth editions. In these editions the chapters on the power of the church and of the magistrate are sandwiched by Christian freedom and eschatological spirituality.

In the final edition of the *Institutes* (1559) Calvin entirely reshuffles this material; the chapter on Christian liberty is placed after justification, the one on the ecclesiastical power is spread throughout the fourth book of the *Institutes*, and the chapter on the life of a Christian is placed after regeneration by faith. Just like the first edition, the final edition of the *Institutes* ends with the chapter on the political administration, now as part of the fourth book on the external means of grace. Calvin copies the text on Christian liberty from the first edition in all the following editions, only adding a few sentences or a short paragraph here and there. While the text remains largely the same, the context changes, especially in the final edition.

### *Freedom Consists of Three Parts*

The shifts in the structure of the *Institutes* have consequences for the relationship between Christian liberty and politics. In 1536 Calvin opens the discussion of Christian liberty by stressing its importance for the conscience that will otherwise “dare undertake almost nothing without faltering [...] unless this freedom be grasped, neither Christ nor gospel truth, [1559: nor inner peace of soul] is rightly known.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> P. Barth and G. Niesel (eds), *Joannis Calvini opera selecta* (Munich: Kaiser, 1926–1936) [henceforth *os*] 1:223.

<sup>5</sup> J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1536 Edition*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 176. All direct quotes from the 1536 edition are from this translation. Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes* (1559) 3.19.1. All direct quotes from the 1559 edition are from John T. McNeil (ed), *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, transl. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), the following references only will mention the paragraph number. A reference to *os* is only added if the Latin is important.

According to Calvin, Christian freedom consists of three parts. The first is that the consciences of believers forget all law-righteousness for their justification. We should turn away from ourselves, and look only to Christ.<sup>6</sup> The second part of Christian liberty is that believers willingly obey the law, exactly because they are freed from it as a yoke. If you look at the law even the best works are incomplete and damnable, but the surprise of Christian liberty is that God calls us to obedience with fatherly gentleness and therefore we serve him not like servants, but like sons obey their fathers who “do not hesitate to offer them incomplete and half-done and even defective works, trusting that their obedience and readiness of mind will be accepted.”<sup>7</sup> The third part of Christian freedom regards the *adiaphora*, the things that we freely can use or refuse. The knowledge of this point is very important lest our consciences become restless and ensnared in superstitions as in a maze. “If a man begins to doubt whether he may use linen for sheets, shirts, handkerchiefs, and napkins, he will afterward be uncertain also about hemp; finally, doubt will even arise over tow.”<sup>8</sup> We should appreciate all God’s gifts and use them for the purpose they were given to us, without scruple of conscience or trouble of mind. How does the distinction between the spiritual and carnal liberty function in 1536? According to Calvin, Christian freedom is spiritual and therefore there is no reason to abuse God’s good gifts for one’s own pleasure or with disregard of weaker Christians; Calvin advocates moderation and charity. The emphasis on the spiritual character of Christian liberty is first and foremost a correction of the abuse of liberty; spiritual liberty stands over against carnal liberty. But the emphasis on the spiritual nature of liberty also serves a second goal. Because Christian freedom is spiritual it pertains to the spiritual realm, to the life of the Christian before the face of God. He or she is bound to the Word, but not to human traditions and commandments. This implies that one cannot appeal to Christian liberty for political revolution. Calvin writes that the consciences of believers are not bound to human authority in those things in which God wants them to be free, but he adds that “huge troubles are stirred up, partly by the seditious, partly by slanderers as if all human obedience were at the same time removed and cast down.”<sup>9</sup>

The seditious, of course, are the revolutionary Anabaptists and the slanderers are the papal theologians who called all advocates of evangelical reform

<sup>6</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 1536, 176–177. Cf. *Institutes* 3.19.2.

<sup>7</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 1536, 178. Cf. *Institutes* 3.19.5.

<sup>8</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 1536, 179. Cf. *Institutes* 3.19.7.

<sup>9</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 1536, 183–184. Cf. *Institutes* 3.19.14.

revolutionary. Calvin criticizes the usurping power of the church over the consciences, but confirms the political power of the magistrate, by stressing that Christian liberty is spiritual. Thus spiritual liberty is not only opposed to carnal, but also to political liberty.

### ***A Two-Fold Regiment***

Following Luther's distinction of the two kingdoms, Calvin discerns a twofold government, a *duplex regimen*: "in man: one side is spiritual, whereby the conscience is instructed in piety and in reverencing God; the other side is political, whereby man is educated for the duties of humanity and citizenship that must be maintained among men."<sup>10</sup> These two governments are usually called the *jurisdictio spiritualis et temporalis*. Calvin uses the nouns *regimen* and *regnum* interchangeably and places the political and temporal *ordo* over against the spiritual realm. The former is located in the inner mind (*interior animus*), while the latter regulates outward behavior (*externi mores*). There are "two worlds, over which different kings and different laws have authority."<sup>11</sup> In the first edition of the *Institutes* Calvin mainly uses Christian freedom to underline the priority and exclusive authority of the Word in the church and to refute the claim that any human institution or tradition can be binding for the conscience. Christian freedom pertains to the spiritual *regnum*. Calvin does not object to the political order, but to those who usurp power in the church and act as butchers instead of pastors. Ecclesiastical power is given for building up the church and should either be completely governed by the Word of God or relativized as a merely external regulation for church practice. The spiritual power of the pope is tyrannically opposed to God's Word. Calvin rejects new doctrines that turn people away from the purity of God's Word and new laws that trouble unhappy consciences; the whole so-called ecclesiastical jurisdiction (*iurisdictio pseudo-ecclesiastica*). "For if we allow Christ to rule among us, this whole kind of dominion is easily overturned and laid low."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 1536, 184. Cf. *Institutes* 3.19.15. This connection between Christian liberty and political theory is often overlooked. William R. Stevenson, however, states that Calvin's emphasis on the rule of God through political and social institutions corrects and amends a revolutionary concept of liberty. William R. Stevenson, Jr., *Sovereign Grace: The Place and Significance of Christian Freedom in John Calvin's Political Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 45–46.

<sup>11</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 1536, 184, *os* 1:232. Cf. *Institutes* 3.19.15, *os* 4:249.

<sup>12</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 1536, 200, *os* 1:250. Cf. *Institutes* 4.11.8, *os* 5:203.

The *duplex regimen* is important for the further development of Calvin's thought. In 1543 he adds that this distinction prevents the misapplication of spiritual freedom to the political realm. One should not conclude that Christians are less subject to outward government and human laws, because their consciences are free. They are not "released from all bodily servitude because they are free according to the spirit."<sup>13</sup>

In 1550 he adds that the issue is so difficult because many do not distinguish sharply enough between the *forum externum* and the *forum conscientiae*.<sup>14</sup> What makes the matter more complicated is the fact that Paul writes in Romans 13 that the magistrate should be obeyed not only out of fear for punishment, but for conscience' sake. Whereas Calvin wants to restrict the freedom of conscience to the spiritual realm to correct misuse of church power, Paul seemingly says that political laws are binding for the conscience. It can easily be concluded that if the state can bind the conscience, the church can certainly do the same. This is how some Roman Catholic theologians argued.

To solve the problem Calvin stresses in the final edition that the conscience has respect to God alone, even if it is sometimes extended to human relationships: a good conscience is the inward integrity of heart. A Christian can be bound by love for his weaker brother to abstain from meat, but "he still does not cease to keep freedom of conscience. We see how this law, while binding outward actions, leaves the conscience free."<sup>15</sup>

#### ***Christian Freedom Relativizes the Political Order***

The final paragraph of the 1536-*Institutes* states that Christian liberty does not extend to the political realm. Calvin wants to convince the French magistrates—and in the first place king Francis I to whom the work was dedicated—that the evangelicals in the French Catholic Church differ from the revolutionary Anabaptists. The claim that Christian liberty is spiritual and does not apply to politics thus functions as a disclaimer. The French evangelicals are no radicals. By placing politics in the context of Christian liberty Calvin relativizes the political *ordo*. The relativizing influence of Christian freedom appears in the first place, when Calvin underlines that the magistrate can only bind the body and not the soul, only the outward human being and not the conscience. The distinction corrects those who conclude from Christian freedom that they don't

<sup>13</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 3.19.15, *os* 4:294.

<sup>14</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 3.19.15, *os* 4:295.

<sup>15</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 3.19.16.



have to acknowledge any king or magistrate, but only the authority of Christ. “But whoever knows how to distinguish between body and soul, between this present fleeting life and that future eternal life, will without difficulty know that Christ’s spiritual Kingdom and the civil jurisdiction are things completely distinct.”<sup>16</sup>

Secondly, the magistrate is only necessary because and as long as the kingdom of God has not yet fully come. Rome claims that the church is perfect and that its rules have the status of divine law. Calvin says that exactly because the church is not yet the kingdom of God, a civil magistrate is necessary ad interim. Therefore the spiritual kingdom of Christ is not opposed to the civil government, but only distinct from it. The heavenly kingdom of Christ has already begun on earth and this beginning forecasts immortal and incorruptible blessedness. As long as all remains imperfect the civil government has as its goal “to adjust our life to the society of men, to form our social behavior to civil righteousness, to reconcile us with one another, and to promote general peace and tranquility.”<sup>17</sup> In 1559 Calvin adds before the other goals, that the government has “to cherish and protect the outward worship of God, to defend sound doctrine of piety and the position of the church.”<sup>18</sup>

The kingdom of God does not wipe out the present life. While we travel as pilgrims on earth to the heavenly fatherland, we need some help on our pilgrimage. Without a government, true *humanitas* would be endangered. The magistrate serves to restrain sin in this world and, more important for Calvin, corrects the power claims of the Roman Church.

Calvin replaces an omnipotent church that rules over the consciences by inventing additional laws, with a magistrate that creates and defends the public sphere in such a way that the church can be reformed and flourish. Exactly because the church is spiritual it is not allowed to bind the conscience in externals. Exactly because the magistrate is external it is called to guard external space for true religion, although it can never bind the consciences.

Let no man be disturbed that I now commit to civil government the duty of rightly establishing religion, which I seem above to have put outside of human decision. For, when I approve of a civil administration that aims

<sup>16</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 1536, 207. Cf. *Institutes* 4.20.1.

<sup>17</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 1536, 208. Cf. *Institutes* 4.20.3.

<sup>18</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 4.20.3. On the development of this part of the *Institutes* cf. H. van den Belt, ‘The Exegetical Background of Calvin’s View of the Government.’ In: H. van den Belt (ed.), *Restoration through Redemption: John Calvin Revisited* [Studies in Reformed Theology, 23] (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 83–94.

to prevent the true religion which is contained in God's law from being openly and with public sacrilege violated and defiled with impunity, I do not here, any more than before, allow men to make laws according to their own decision concerning religion and the worship of God.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, the relativizing influence of Christian freedom can also be seen in those parts of Calvin's political theory in which he discusses divergent practical political situations: It is the divine calling of the magistrates to govern the people, but the form—monarchy, aristocracy, or democracy—is less important. The people always have to obey the magistrates, even if they misuse their authority, but lower magistrates must withstand the licentiousness of kings. Above and, if necessary, even against human authority, everyone has to obey God "to whose will the desires of all kings ought to be subject, to whose decrees all their commands ought to yield, to whose majesty their scepters ought to be submitted."<sup>20</sup>

All of these relativizing consequences of Christian freedom are retained in the final text of the *Institutes*, but due to the reshuffling of the *Institutes* and to a growing emphasis on the authority of the civil government in external religious affairs, the original relativizing power of Christian liberty for the specific political order is no longer very clear.

The distinction of a spiritual and eternal from a political and temporal sphere also remains throughout the editions of the *Institutes*, but the original argument that Christian liberty implies that the church should be reformed by refraining from binding the conscience externally and by binding the conscience only inwardly to the Word of God and that the magistrate should create the external benchmarks for the reform of the church without violating the conscience, can only be found by reconstructing the text.

Calvin was happy with the final structure of the *Institutes*, but the reshuffling of the material makes it difficult to see the original connection between his view of Christian liberty and his political theory. Although the political paragraph in the final edition is only loosely connected to the chapter on the church and the sacraments, one might easily conclude that the magistrate is one of the external means of grace and thus overemphasize its role, especially because the political paragraphs are no longer sandwiched by the chapters on Christian liberty and the meditation on the future life. In 1559 Calvin adds that the topic might seem alien to the *spiritualis doctrina* of faith.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps he felt that

<sup>19</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 1536, 208–209. Cf. *Institutes* 4.20.3.

<sup>20</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 1536, 225. Cf. *Institutes* 4.20.32.

<sup>21</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 4.20.1, *os* 5:471.

in the new structure it seems to come out of the blue after the doctrine of the sacraments, but Calvin possibly also sensed that the original connection with Christian liberty was no longer clear.

### **William Perkins**

The further development of Reformed theology disconnected the concept of Christian liberty from both the reformation of the church and the responsibility of the civil government, individualizing and spiritualizing the concept more and more. Two examples suffice to illustrate this development. In 1596 William Perkins (1558–1602) wrote a treatise, titled *A Discourse of Conscience*. He defined Christian liberty as

a spirituall and holy freedome purchased by Christ. I say it is *spiritual*, first to put a difference betweene it and civill libertie, which standes in outward and bodily freedomes and priviledges, secondly to confute the Jewes, that looke for earthly libertie by Christ: and the Anabaptists, who imagine a freedome from all authoritie of Magistrates in the kingdome of Christ.<sup>22</sup>

Whereas Calvin used the concept of Christian liberty as a reforming force for both church and magistrate, Perkins develops the distinction between the two realms into a division. Christian liberty is so spiritual that it not only excludes revolution, as Calvin also stated, but has no political or social consequences at all. With Calvin, Perkins distinguishes three parts of Christian liberty. The first is a freedome from the iustification of the morall law. [...] The second part, is freedome from the rigour of the lawe, which exacteth perfect obedience and condemneth all imperfection. [...] The third part is, that the conscience is freed from the bond of the ceremoniall law. [...] Hence it followeth that all Christians may freely without scruple of conscience use all things indifferent, so be it the manner of using them be good.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> William Perkins, 'A Discourse of Conscience' in William Perkins, *Works* ([Cambridge]: John Legate, 1600), 813–909, 868. The original publication was William Perkins, *A Discourse of Conscience* (Cambridge, John Legate, 1596).

<sup>23</sup> Perkins, *Works*, 868–869.

Perkins distinguishes between a natural and a spiritual use of Christian liberty. He, however, does not apply it to the church and the magistrate, but to the natural and spiritual life of individual believers. The natural use is for the things we need or may use, such as drinking wine and enjoying the infinite varieties of colors, savors, tastes, and forms in creation. Exercises and sports refresh the body and the mind but their use is restricted must be used sparingly and moderately. Not everything is lawful, dancing for instance is forbidden, because “what account can bee given of these paces backward & forward, of caprings, iumps, gambols, turnings, with many other frisks of lightnes and vanitie, more be seeming goates and apes, of whome they are commonly used, then men.”<sup>24</sup>

The spiritual use of Christian liberty applies when we meditate on the creatures and make spiritual applications from natural things, for instance on seeing a vine and branches think of the union between Christ and the church and or seeing a rainbow think of the promise of God not to drown the world again.

The only place where the connection to civil authority reappears, is when Perkins says indifferent things “after the law is once made of them, remaine still indifferent in themselues: yet obedience to the law is neccessary, and that for conscience sake.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, things not in themselves binding for the individual conscience can become binding because Christians have to obey the civil government.

Of course, this is only a partial picture of Perkins thought on the subject, but the change with regard to Christian liberty is clear, the application is spiritualized and personalized and the reforming force for both church and state has disappeared.

### ***Synopsis Purioris Theologiae***

The Leiden *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae* was originally published as a cycle of 52 disputations defended under four Leiden professors: Johannes Polyander (1568–1646), Andreas Rivetus (1572–1651), Antonius Thysius (1565–1640), and Anthonius Walaeus (1573–1639).<sup>26</sup> The *Synopsis* was written after the synod of

<sup>24</sup> Perkins, *Works*, 869.

<sup>25</sup> Perkins, *Works*, 871.

<sup>26</sup> Johannes Polyander, Andreas Rivetus, Antonius Walaeus, and Antonius Thysius, *Synopsis purioris theologiae, disputationibus quinquaginta duabus comprehensa ac conscripta*,

Dort and claims to phrase the Reformed orthodox faith as it was purified from the errors of Arminianism, hence the *Synopsis of Purer Theology*. Its intention was to summarize the Reformed position in positive statements for theological students.

The thirty-fifth disputation—and consequently the corresponding chapter of the book—deals with Christian liberty. After the book was published in 1625, the professors decided to repeat the series for a few times with disputations on the same subjects, but with a different text and thus the Hungarian student István from Kecskemét, cited above, defended his theses in the thirty-fifth disputation of the first *repetitio* in 1627.

### ***Distinction between Spiritual and Political Freedom***

The disputation *De Libertate Christiana*, defended in 1622 by Jacobus Henricus under the presidency of Andreas Rivetus, consists of 49 theses.<sup>27</sup> It opens by placing the subject in its proper context. The preceding disputations deal with redemption and its application by faith

for all who through Christ's merit have been redeemed from slavery to sin and death; and also the sanctification of those who have been justified and their thankfulness in the exercise of good works. In fitting order, therefore, it follows that we now undertake an investigation into the true Christian, or evangelical, freedom that is shared by all who have received the fruits of Christ's suffering.<sup>28</sup>

This *libertas Christiana* or *evangelica* is so important that if it is not held correctly one is unable to know Christ, the Gospel, and inward peace in the souls in the right way.<sup>29</sup> The disputation contrasts *libertas* and *servitus*. Slavery (Leiden: Elzevir, 1625). The Leiden *Synopsis* was reprinted in the nineteenth century.

H. Bavinck (ed.), *Synopsis purioris theologiae* (Leiden: D. Donner, 1881). At present the Research Group Classic Reformed Theology is working on a critical edition of which the first volume has been published. Dolf te Velde, Willem J. van Asselt, William den Boer (eds.) Riemer A. Faber (trans.), *Synopsis purioris theologiae, Synopsis of a Purer Theology: Latin Text and English Translation*, vol. 1, (Leiden: Brill, 2014). The disputation on Christian Liberty will be published in volume 2.

<sup>27</sup> Andreas Rivetus, *Disputationum theologicarum trigesima-quinta, De libertate Christiana*, Jacobus Henricus respondent, (Leiden: Elzevir, 1622). Cf. Bavinck, *Synopsis* 357–372.

<sup>28</sup> *spt* 35.1. Bavinck, *Synopsis*, 357. The translation is from Riemer Faber.

<sup>29</sup> *spt* 35.2. Bavinck, *Synopsis*, 357. Without mentioning Calvin, the *Synopsis* copies the phrase from the *Institutes* 3.19.1.

is a state of subjection, either voluntary or forced and so men are divided into slaves, freemen, and freedmen or liberated slaves. Slaves are “under the power of another person either by the right of war, by birth, by just sentence of condemnation, by purchase, or by legal determination.”<sup>30</sup> Words and phrases from civic and corporal slavery and liberty can be used to explain their spiritual counterparts, but the author is very clear to state that the disputation is not “dealing here with the question of that civic and corporal slavery, nor with its opposite, civic and corporal freedom.”<sup>31</sup>

After Adam abused his natural freedom he and we lost it and became slaves to sin and Satan and subject to vanity and misery. Accordingly there is a threefold liberty: that of nature as Adam enjoyed, that of grace—the liberty of believers in this life—and that of glory, the liberty whereby believers will once be freed from all misery. Christian freedom is of the second sort, *libertas gratiae*. The *Synopsis* defines Christian liberty as the condition of people who have been set free by the grace of Christ, a condition whereby their consciences have been released from slavery to sin, the tyranny of the Devil, and from the precise demands and curse of the moral law, and from observing the ceremonial law; and the yoke of human traditions having been shaken off, they safely conduct intermediate things without reproach by applying knowledge of faith and practical judgment of love, so that they who have not received ‘a spirit of slavery unto fear’ but a spirit of sonship (Romans 8:15) may serve God willingly and eagerly in soul and in body, ‘for the praise of his glorious grace’ [Ephesians 1:6] and their own eternal salvation.<sup>32</sup>

In its discussion of the material cause of Christian liberty<sup>33</sup> the disputation first deals with liberty from sin and its consequences. It rejects antinomianism; Christians are free from the law as a means for justification or as far as it condemns, but the law remains useful for them, because it teaches them in which good works they ought to walk. Christian liberty includes freedom of conscience regarding human traditions, because God has granted no-one the authority to bind someone else’s conscience.

<sup>30</sup> *spt* 35.3. Bavinck, *Synopsis*, 357.

<sup>31</sup> *spt* 35.4. Bavinck, *Synopsis*, 357–358.

<sup>32</sup> *spt* 35.7. Bavinck, *Synopsis*, 358–359.

<sup>33</sup> As is common in the *Synopsis*, the disputation first gives a clear definition of the theme and then elaborates on it following the lines of the Aristotelian distinction of the efficient, material, formal and final causes.

This claim leads to the distinction between the spiritual and the civil realms.

“But since we are speaking about strictly spiritual government, which we claim belongs entirely to God alone [...], we do not wish what we say about spiritual freedom to be wrongly drawn into the realm of politics. [...] For we reject the fanatics who under the pretext of Christian freedom cast off every form of civil obedience.”<sup>34</sup>

The Latin opposes the spiritual *regimen* and the political *ordo*. The first and second repetitions make the same or similar distinctions, the second repetition—the one in the Debrecen collection of Laskai Matkó János—refers to the example of Onesimus, who was loved as a brother and still a slave according to the flesh.<sup>35</sup>

In the *Synopsis* this distinction is contrasted to the Roman Catholic position that—in the view of the Reformed orthodox—binds the consciences by political laws as much as by divine laws. Human laws can only be binding in a mediated way, because God commands obedience towards the magistrate. Bellarmine incorrectly teaches that “the civil law is no less binding than the divine law, and that all laws that have been made by any one at all (whether God, an angel, or a human being) are binding in the same manner”.<sup>36</sup>

This refutation of the counter-Reformation is a residue from the original application of Christian freedom to ecclesiastical power by Calvin. He used the distinction between spiritual and political to deny the power of the church over the conscience and to maintain the power of the magistrate over the external life of the Christian. Bellarmine and other representatives of the Catholic Reformation maintained that the laws of the church and the magistrate were binding for the conscience, because Christians are called to obedience to all authorities in Romans 13 for instance.

At the end of the disputation, the *Synopsis* repeats the main thrust of the distinction between the spiritual and the political freedom:

34 *spt* 35.18. Bavinck, *Synopsis*, 362.

35 Antonius Thysius, *Disputationum theologicarum, quae ex ordine repeti consueverunt trigesima quinta, De libertate christiana*, Rycmannus B. ten Bem Stephanus respondent (Leiden: Elzevir, 1631), thesis 11.

36 *spt* 35.19. Bavinck, *Synopsis*, 362. The disputation paraphrases Bellarmine. Cf. Robertus Bellarminus, *Disputationes de controversiis christianae fidei adversus hujus temporis haereticos*, Tertia Controversia Generalis de Summo Pontifice, Liber Tertius, Controversiarum de Membris Ecclesiae, Caput xi (iii,iii,11). Cf. Robertus Bellarminus, *Opera Omnia*, Justinus Fèvre (ed.), (Paris: Louis Vives, 1870–1874), vol. 3, 17–18.

This freedom does not constitute exemption from all laws (both divine and human ones) and that it is not a license for living by the feelings of one's heart and of indulging the sinful desires of the flesh, nor a release from civic responsibility, duties and payments. For there is nothing to prevent those who are free spiritually from serving with their bodies (1Corinthians 7:21); "servants obey your earthly masters, as to the Lord" (Ephesians 6:5). Therefore Christians are subject to their kings and magistrates, as before (Romans 13:1), and they seriously condemn all those who under the pretext of Christian freedom attempt to shake off the yoke of magistrates and who enslave themselves to the Devil by 'turning their freedom into an opportunity for the flesh' (Galatians 1:13).<sup>37</sup>

Calvin already acknowledged that according to Romans 13 the Christian may be bound by outward laws or human ordinances, but the conscience as related to God still remained inwardly free. Perkins and the *Synopsis*, however, stress that things indifferent in themselves become binding because of obedience to the law or to the magistrate and that Christian liberty does not exclude bodily servitude and subjection to the civil government.

Calvin relativized the power of church and magistrate by stressing spiritual Christian liberty, whereas later Reformed theologians confirm the power of the Reformed church and the magistrate by stressing that Christian liberty is so spiritual that it does not have any bodily or civil consequences.

#### ***Hermeneutics***

The *Synopsis*-disputation also discusses the Old Testament legislation. The moral law, as summarized in the Ten Commandments, has a lasting value. Christian liberty implies that ceremonial laws are no longer binding for the consciences. Still their fulfillment in Christ does not take away their great value because they prefigure Christ. The judicial laws may contain some ceremonial elements, but the laws themselves are out of date, for example "the one about the corpse of someone who has been hanged, that it must be buried on the same day lest the land should be polluted."<sup>38</sup> Apparently that was difficult to apply to the seventeenth century situation, in which it was a matter of Christian liberty to be able to hang dead bodies of criminals in the open air for much longer than a day.

<sup>37</sup> *spt* 35.47. Bavinck, *Synopsis*, 370.

<sup>38</sup> *spt* 35.28. Bavinck, *Synopsis*, 368.



The distinction between the two kinds of laws or between the two aspects—the moral and binding and the circumstantial and not-binding—within the laws has to be made according to a certain norm. According to the *Synopsis*, the moral laws with a lasting value can be recognized from the universal principles of nature and common sense. These laws should not be kept because of the authority of Moses, but to the extent that they are “marked by law and common reason and pertain to the law of nature.”<sup>39</sup> Apparently Christian freedom does not extend to those elements in the Old Testament legislation that correspond with the universal natural law.

Thus, in a very restricted sense, general or natural revelation becomes the judge of special revelation, or at least the lens by which the distinction is made between lasting moral elements and mere juridical elements in the laws of the Old Testament. The criterion lies in the universal principles of nature, common sense, and human reason.

The distinction is made in order to refute the rejection by the Anabaptists and other fanatics of all ancient Roman laws or other laws for Christian legislation and the plea of some of them to reintroduce Mosaic laws for contemporary civil cases. According to the *Synopsis*, this idea is “not only dangerous and confusing but also wrong and foolish.”<sup>40</sup>

The discussion of the material cause of Christian liberty turns to the *adiaphora*, which are not good or bad in a moral sense. It is important to know this aspect of Christian liberty, because if people doubt about the will of God in these things, they easily “fall into all manner of superstitious ideas. In this way, once a scruple has befallen someone in the use of wool or linen, he will thereafter not be entirely sure about hemp, either.”<sup>41</sup>

In the *adiaphora*, or middle things, a Christian on the one hand should not needlessly offend weaker brothers, but on the other hand also not give in to those who are superstitious. The freedom of conscience does not always have to be used by the Christian, because it concerns external things. By way of application the disputation turns to politics and defends the right of the magistrate or the church to regulate things that are indifferent in themselves.

This does not bind the liberty itself, but only the outward use of it.

<sup>39</sup> *spt* 35.29. Bavinck, *Synopsis*, 368.

<sup>40</sup> *spt* 35.31. Bavinck, *Synopsis*, 366.

<sup>41</sup> *spt* 35.32. Bavinck, *Synopsis*, 368. The Latin for hemp is *cannabis*, but the early modern use, of course, was only external. The example stems from Calvin’s *Institutes* 3.19.7.

For strictly speaking it is only God who binds the consciences, [...] and yet, on occasion a magistrate can, for the good of the nation, order or forbid something to be done that of itself is an intermediate thing (*adiaphoron*). And the church may decide something of a similar substance for the sake of good order—in such a way, however, that it does not assume for itself any power over the conscience.<sup>42</sup>

The state or the church should not, however, abuse their rights nor transgress the boundaries of their jurisdiction. The subjects or church members are bound to obedience, but if the circumstances change or if necessity requires it, they are free to do otherwise. Of course, we should also not obey any authority that invents rules contrary to God's Word or which do violence to the conscience.

Still, Christian liberty

does not constitute exemption from all laws (both divine and human ones) and it is not a license for living by the feelings of one's heart and of indulging the sinful desires of the flesh, nor a release from civic responsibility, duties and payments. For there is nothing to prevent those who are free spiritually from serving with their bodies (1Corinthians 7:21).<sup>43</sup>

Servants have to obey their masters, subjects serve their kings and it is wrong to revolt against the magistrates under the pretext of Christian freedom. In sum, as the disputation in the second repetition of the *Synopsis*—the one in the Debrecen collection—states: “We do not extend this spiritual liberty that is opposite to multiple [spiritual] slaveries, to the political realm.”<sup>44</sup>

### Conclusions

John Calvin uses the distinction between spiritual and carnal or temporal liberty to argue that the church should refrain from binding the conscience externally. Christian freedom is spiritual and therefore the Reformation of the church does not imply revolution. Nevertheless, by placing politics in between Christian liberty and eschatological spirituality he relativizes the political order. The original connection of Christian liberty and Calvin's concept of the

<sup>42</sup> *spt* 35.39. Bavinck, *Synopsis*, 368.

<sup>43</sup> *spt* 35.47. Bavinck, *Synopsis*, 370.

<sup>44</sup> Thysius and ten Bem, *De libertate christiana*, thesis 2.

magistrate relativizes the political order in three ways: a) the magistrate can only bind the outward human being and not the conscience, b) the magistrate is only necessary because the kingdom of God has not yet come, and c) there is no absolute human power, because every magistrate has to give an account to God and lower magistrates are called to protect the people against the abuses of higher magistrates. These elements are retained in the final text of the *Institutes*, but the connection with Christian liberty is easily lost out of sight because of the reshuffling of the text. Calvin's original application of Christian liberty offered a limitation of ecclesiastical power as well as a legitimation of the civil government to reform the church. But this can only be found by returning to the earlier editions of the *Institutes*.

From the place of the political paragraph in the final edition one might too easily conclude that the magistrate is one of the external means of grace and thus overemphasize its role, especially because the political paragraphs are no longer sandwiched by the chapters on Christian liberty and the meditation on the future life.

The development of Reformed theology reveals a growing emphasis on the application of Christian liberty to the individual life of the believer, as the case of Perkins shows. The *Synopsis* does not restrict the application to the individual, but uses the distinction between spiritual liberty and bodily liberty mainly to distinguish between the ceremonial and moral parts of Old Testament legislation. Where Perkins and the *Synopsis* stress that Christian liberty does not extend to the political realm they enforce the power of the civil government, without copying the relativizing elements from Calvin's *Institutes*, at least not in the context of Christian liberty.

The statement that Christian liberty does not apply to the political sphere originated as a disclaimer against Anabaptist revolutionary ideas. In the development of Reformed theology however it became a legitimation of the political *status quo*. This development started with Calvin who restlessly corrected the *Institutes* isolating his chapter on the political administration from its original theological context in the final edition.

The development was strengthened in the academic theology at the Reformed universities of the young European protestant states in the process of confessionalisation. The sovereignty of God over all things, in which the Christian liberty ultimately rests, places the earthly powers—both of the church and of the state—in their right position under God. It is easier to maintain this position from the perspective of a persecuted minority—the young Calvin—than from that of a ruling majority. In a position of political power, the emphasis on the sovereignty of God too easily develops into a support for the *status quo* and the earthly powers.

For the right understanding of Christian liberty it is important to avoid a spiritualization and individualization of this fundamental part of Reformed theology, which has so many important implications both for hermeneutics and ethics. Reformed Christians should not give up applying Christian liberty to social and political issues.